Perpetrators: “Ordinary Men” or “Hitler’s Willing Executioners”?

by

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Based on the book Ordinary Men by Christopher Browning

Introduction

The workshop is aimed at high school, college and university students, as well as teachers. Participants will receive historical knowledge about acts that were committed by the Nazi perpetrators. They will be confronted with the perpetrator’s motivation and state of mind. By analyzing individual cases, students will focus on both the individual and the group behavior of the perpetrators. We shall use selected excerpts from the book Ordinary Men by Christopher Browning. The presentation is 45 minutes and is divided into three parts as follows:

• Plenary session: Introduction - 10 minutes. The introduction is comprised of a discussion on Nazi cruelty and an outline of the activities of Battalion 101 of the Order Police as described by Browning.

• Reading excerpts -10 minutes. The group is divided into small groups; each reading excerpts about two characters from the book. (An option would be to have each group read excerpts about one of the characters.) The group will analyze the behavior of the character introduced and answer the following questions: What kind of a man is the character? What kind of a Nazi and what kind of an officer is he? The analysis will be based on our introduction and on the texts.

• Plenary session – 25 minutes. After each group presents its findings, there will be a concluding discussion and summary of the activity.

An In Depth View of our Workshop “Perpetrators “

The workshop is based on Christopher Browning’s Ordinary Men

Tell the story of unit 101

Some Statistics about Unit 101

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month and Year</th>
<th>Number of Jews Shot by Unit 101</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 1942-October 1942</td>
<td>7,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1942-November 1943</td>
<td>30,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1942–November 1943</td>
<td>42,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1943</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum number of deaths by unit 101</td>
<td>83,555</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Battalion 101 was a battalion of the Order Police

What was the German Order Police? It was a policemen unit; they were not soldiers, not a regular army, but reserve forces. The battalion was formed mainly to keep German occupied areas under control. The general government in Poland had four
The Chronology of the Actions.
Following is the text to be read and analyzed:

*The time had come for Trapp to address the men and inform them of the assignment the battalion had received.*

Pale and nervous, with a choking voice and tears in his eyes, Trapp visibly fought to control himself as he spoke. The battalion, he said plaintively, had to perform a frightfully unpleasant task. This assignment was not to his liking, indeed it was highly regrettable but the orders came from the highest authorities. If it would make their task any easier the men should remember that in Germany the bombs were falling on women and children.

He then turned to the matter at hand. *The Jews had instigated the American boycott that had damaged Germany, one policeman remembered Trapp saying. There were Jews in the village of Jozefow who were involved with the partisans, he explained according to two others. The battalion had now been ordered to round up these Jews. The male Jews of working age were to be separated and taken to work camp. The remaining Jews—the women, children and elderly—were to be shot on the spot by the battalion. Having explained what awaited his men, Trapp then made an extraordinary offer: if any of the older men among did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out.*

I July 13th, 1942 - In the morning, the men received the order to leave the barracks at Bilgoraj with extra ammunition. They went to Jozefow. Major Trapp (Papa Trapp) explained they had to round up 1800 Jews of the town, separate the young men to take them to work camps, and kill the women, children, and elderly on the spot. Trapp gave the possibility for the older men to step out if they thought they were not up to it. Twelve stepped out. The Germans rounded up the Jews of Jozefow and took them in small groups to the forest. There, each policeman was paired up with a victim in order to shoot him in the back of the neck. Sometimes before shooting, the policemen had a conversation with the victim. The men who were selected to work numbered three hundred. One thousand, five hundred women, children and elderly Jews were killed.

II August 17th, in Lomazy – The Action was assisted by Trawniki’s Polish volunteers, who did the shooting. The Jewish population of Lomazy was rounded up and was taken to the market square where sixty or seventy Jewish men were selected to dig graves in the forest. After a few hours, the Jewish population of Lomazy was driven to the forest and concentrated at three different collecting points in the forest. Men and women were separated and were ordered to undress; the naked people were forced to lie on the ground, sometimes for hours. When the preparations for the shootings were done, people were forced to the graves. From one of the sites of the graves, the Trawnikis (hiwis) shot the victims. One thousand, seven hundred people were killed and their clothing and valuables were collected. Unlike the killing in Jozefow, the policemen were not paired up with their victims.

III July 22nd, 1942 - First Deportations from Warsaw to Treblinka
On the 19th of August, there were also deportations from the Lublin area to Treblinka, from Parczew. Unit 101 was assigned to take the Jews to the train station, and to shoot the weak and those who could not walk. The first deportation consisted of 3000 people, followed by another 2000 a few days later. From August 25th – 26th, 11,000 Jews from Miedzyrec were deported to Treblinka. Captain Wohlauf brought his young bride who was four months pregnant to the deportation. She was present at the marketplace and witnessed it all. The weak were shot on the spot and others were taken to the train and packed in its cars. The Trawnikis assisted in the Miedzyrec deportation.

IV End of August and beginning of September - Treblinka ceased activities and had to be reorganized. The shootings continued. On September 22nd, there was the killing of 200-300 people from the town of Serokomla. Machine guns were set up outside the town. Again, each policeman was lined up with a victim whom he had to shoot.

V September 25th – The Unit 101 policeman Sergeant Jobst was ambushed and killed near the town of Talcyn. There was a retaliation measure consisting of an order to kill 200 Poles. Trapp went to Talcyn and shot 78 Polish men of the lowest class. Then he decided to kill Jews from the Kock Ghetto instead and 180 Jews were killed.

VI October – November 1942 -The Ghetto-clearing
This was a very intensive period when many people were resettled before deportation to Treblinka and, later, also deported to Treblinka. Unit 101 was involved in the deportation of at least 27,000 Jews and the killing of 1000 others, especially the weak and those who tried to escape.

VII Mid-November – After the massacres of Josefow, Lomazy, Serokomla, Konskowala and elsewhere, and the liquidation of various other ghettos, the total number of victims was 6,500 people killed and 42,000 people deported to Treblinka. Then the “Jew hunts” began, to make the region completely Judenrein. From 1941, Jews found outside ghetto boundaries were to be killed on the spot. In the Lublin area where Unit 101 was stationed, there had been killings of Jews even before the massacres started. From mid-November, after most ghettos had been cleared, however, the hunt to find Jews began. They systematically swept the forests, to find Jews, partisans and escaped POWs. They searched in the towns for hiding places and tracked people down to kill them immediately as well. The killing was personal because the policemen saw the victims face to face. Many policemen had become killers and fewer tried to escape shooting the victims than had done so in Josefow. Many search parties were formed by volunteers. The hunt aimed to keep the Lublin area Judenrein. The hunt for Jews was a long process that went on for many months. A ghetto roundup or massacre was a short event of a few hours or maximum, a day. Every day, however, the hunters swept the forest in order to kill their prey on sight.

VIII After the deportation, eight ghettos remained in existence in the Lublin area. Many people who had sought refuge in the forest returned to the ghetto during the fierce cold winter. Life in the forest was difficult; one would leave tracks in the snow and could easily be found.
On May 1st 1943, as the Meidzyrzec was populated once again, an estimated 1000-5000 people were taken to Treblinka and some 1000 were taken to Majdanek.
On May 26th 1943, 1000 people of the Miedryze ghetto were deported to Majdanek. On May 2nd, the Lukow ghetto was liquidated and 3000-4000 Jews were taken to Treblinka. Also, other ghettos were liquidated during the spring of 1943.

**IX November 3rd-4th 1943 – The Harvest Festival**

Only the Jewish prisoners of the Labor camps were still alive in the Lublin area. Himmler decided to kill all of them, 45,000 laborers, in one single action during the Harvest Festival. This was the single largest killing operation during the Holocaust. In late October 1943, the prisoners started to dig graves outside Majdanek, Trawniki and Poniatowa in a zigzag pattern. On November 3rd, 18,000 prisoners were driven to the Majdanek camp. Unit 101 was stationed in Majdanek and they participated in guarding and duties associated with the executing the prisoners. On the same day, some 10,000 prisoners were killed in the same manner in Trawniki and on the next day another 14,000 victims were killed at the third site, Poniatowa. It was there that Unit 101 also participated in the killings and the bodies were afterwards burned in the open air.

The Lublin area was free of Jews and that was the last involvement of Unit 101 in the execution of the “Final Solution”.

**During the discussion that follows, ask how the men of Unit 101 were influenced by:**

- Career
- Group pressure and need to conform to the group
- Army discipline and Army Culture
- Obedience
- To be a ‘man’ and not a coward
- Language - they were ‘cleaning’ and ’making order’ – the language hides the real significance of their actions.
- The environment was anti-German. The men were far from home and life in the Unit was the only thing they have.
- “Papa Trapp” was popular and they were willing to do what they did for him.
- Motivation - before the actions, the men knew that they were going to kill bandits and partisans.

**Extra information about Hoffman and Trapp added during discussion:**

**Wolfgang Hoffmann**, born in 1914, joined the National Socialist Student Union in 1930, as a 16-year-old. In 1932, at eighteen, he became a member of the Hitler Youth. One year later, he joined the SS, even before he graduated from the gymnasiu in 1934. In 1936, he joined the police force in Breslau and became a member of the Nazi Party in 1937. He joined Battalion 101 in the spring of 1942 and in June of that year, he was promoted to Captain, at age 28.

In September–October 1942, Hoffman suffered illness either because of his own bad health or perhaps from psychological stress after the Joesefow massacre. He was transferred to the Eastern front and received the Iron cross for bravery. It was only in 1960 that a judicial investigation was started against Unit 101. While 210 former members were interrogated, only 14 men were indicted. Hoffman was one of them and his trial began in October 1967. In April 1968, Hoffmann was sentenced to eight years, which was reduced to four years. The case against the other members of the
Unit was dropped. The investigation of Unit 101 is one of the few that led to a trial of members of the Order Police. The interrogations are a prime source of Browning’s book. After the war, Hoffman returned to Germany and went back to his old job as a policeman in Hamburg. He was interrogated by the Polish authorities and also interned for a short while by the British.

Major Wilhelm Trapp was a World War I veteran and a recipient of the Iron Cross. He became a career policeman and rose through the ranks. Unit 101 was his first battalion command. In December 1932, he joined the Nazi Party. He was never a member of the SS. Two captains, Hoffman and Wohlauf, said that Trapp was a weak commander, not a military man, and he interfered in the duties of his officers. Trapp was put on trial in Poland for the killing of 78 Poles in Talcyn and he received the death penalty. Trapp was executed in December 1948.

101 Unit Policemen and officers were middle-aged family men from Hamburg on reserve duty and had no battle experience. Most were working class men (63%). The men worked at typical working class jobs such as truck drivers, dock-workers, warehouse and construction workers, machine operators, sailors and waiters, etc. Some were lower middle class (35%), working, for example, as small-businessmen, artisans, government workers and salesmen. Another 2% were middle class professionals, such as teachers or druggists. Their average age was 39, meaning that they were too old for the regular army and, therefore, after 1939 they were conscripted into the reserves. In 1942, 25% of the unit were party members. Most of them finished secondary school by age 14 or 15. One does not find any evidence of social or geographic mobility in their ranks. In general their formative years took place during the pre-Nazi period.

Read and discuss the conclusion with the entire group.

**Conclusion**

*Primo Levi’s discussion of the “Grey Zone”:*
We place both victims and perpetrators in the “gray zone” between black and white, between bad and good. Most people find themselves somewhere in the middle. The Unit 101 finds itself on the darker side of evil. We see that the victims that survive are also not totally pure but find themselves in the “gray zone”. They were forced to survive at the cost of somebody else.
Muhsfeld, an SS man who operated the gas chambers at Auschwitz was once faced with a 16 year old girl who survived the gas. He was shocked and gave an order to quickly kill her with a bullet. He himself quickly fled from the site of the execution. Muhsfeld is on the extreme side of the gray zone. The story shows, however, that even so, he had some pity in him for the girl.